

only know you love her when you let her go (jopper)

by orphan_account

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Summary:

Jim Hopper never realised he was in love with Joyce Byers until it was too late.

(or, that angsty jopper fic with a probable happy ending that nobody really asked for.)

1. I: jim hopper on dealing with affection

Jim Hopper never realised he was in love with Joyce Byers until it was too late.

The first time he had been sixteen and he had developed a crush on this tiny, strong-willed, incredible girl with a temper of fire and a heart of gold, and he never did a thing about it until she was dating an asshole who only Hopper himself seemed to think was an asshole (“Getting a bit possessive there, hey Hop?” One of his friends had teased him) and it was too late for him to even think about telling her that he thought the world of her, even if he could never actually muster the sentence.

The second time he was forty-five, and looking in at her from the hallway of a hospital in Indianapolis, each beep of the monitor she was hooked up to stirring something horrible inside his chest.

Let’s start there.

+ + +

Christmas Eve, 1984.

In inner Hawkins, the night was lively - garlands of lights strung over storefronts, carols drifting from the church as people sang and laughed and rushed from store to store picking up last minute gifts - everything from comic books to headbands to electric razors. Joyce Byers was among these people - she had been so preoccupied with making sure she had enough food - triple-checking the potatoes to make sure they wouldn’t be runny this year - and organising her finances so she had enough for new crayons for Will and film for Jonathan’s camera, she had one-hundred-percent forgotten to get Hop a gift.

She hurried from aisle to aisle - even though it had been over a year, there were enough monsters in her dreams for her to still be wary of leaving the boys on their own for long - looking for something that would be suitable. Ties, chocolate, a watch? Joyce had no idea. She used to buy Lonnie things like that for Christmases and birthdays, but

with Hop, everything either felt way too personal or way too impersonal.

Joyce was so caught up in her thoughts that she didn't notice she was walking right into Flo from the police station until she nearly tripped over her.

"Oh, Flo!" Joyce exclaimed, standing up and raising a hand to steady the other woman's arm. "I am so sorry! I wasn't looking where I was going... I - "

Flo laughed, waving her off. "It's no bother, sweetheart. What are you doin' here? Don't you have them boys to look after?" Her face grew concerned.

Joyce sighed, running a hand through her already messy hair. "I do, but I've been so busy lately I forgot to get a gift for Hopper, and I can't think of a single thing he might want. Do you have any ideas?"

Flo sighed. "Honey, that man does not need anything from you. He is also terrible to buy gifts for. Give the guy a pack of smokes and he's happy as Larry."

Joyce knew she was right, and what was even stressing about anyway, this was Hopper, the frustratingly useless police chief of Hawkins, though he wasn't useless, her brain told her, and he had bought her new twinkling white lights last Christmas so she didn't have face putting those coloured lights up again so soon, and he had fixed the hole in the wall properly and when Lonnie had shown up after hearing about Will's coming back, well, Joyce wasn't sure what Hopper had said to him but he had backed off, and even though Joyce had been angry ("I can fight my own battles, Jim Hopper!") there was a tiny part of her that had been grateful, grateful that whatever was said kept Lonnie and his toxicity away from her sons.

All of this, Joyce thought, made Hop an extremely adequate candidate for a gift from her, even though she had absolutely no idea what was appropriate for a long time slightly-problematic friend who she definitely appreciated more than she let on.

Flo looked at Joyce, and Joyce wondered if Flo could tell what was

going through her head because the woman was looking at her with a twinkle in her eye that Joyce did not like the look of. A claim that she needed something 'more meaningful' as a gift was on her lips, when Flo said, "Don't you worry though, Joyce, I have an idea."

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That's how, at eight o'clock at night on Christmas Eve, Joyce Byers was driving along dim, deserted Mirkwood, with a box wrapped in vibrant red paper next to her wallet riding beside her in the passenger seat.

Mannheim Steamroller's remake of Deck the Halls played on the car radio as Joyce sped over the lonely road's bumps and cracks, trying her best not to break the limit. If it weren't for the music, it would have been idyllic - the moon was only a sliver in the sky, visible through the tops of the snow-covered trees. There was snow melting on the edge of the road - droplets of water clinging to the icicles and glistening like crystals in the starlight. It was totally deserted - but it wouldn't remain that way for long.

In twenty-six seconds a teenager ploughed on stolen vodka would speed down the hill at the top of Mirkwood, only interested in returning home from whatever Christmas party he had been at before his parents missed him. He wouldn't even notice the small green car until it was too late for him to swerve.

Then he would let out a shriek of horror, followed by a string of cussing. He would jump out of his car, pausing only a second to berate the damage to his hood, before rushing to Joyce's car. He would see the streaks of blood sticking her brown hair to her scalp, and he would see the bright red of the wrapping paper, but he wouldn't recognise her because he couldn't catch a glimpse of her face.

Then he would run in the direction of town, not pausing to look at anything, but screaming for help over and over again, not stopping for breath nor to answer caroler's queries until he got to the police station, panting.

"There's been an accident," He'll say, leaning on the doorframe for

support, brushing his mousy, greasy hair back from his eyes. "I hit... a woman... I don't know if she's okay."

That will happen in twenty-six seconds. But for this moment, Joyce Byers is content, enjoying the idyllic Christmas scenery with a warm feeling in her chest, because she had found a gift for Hopper, and he was coming over for Christmas, and maybe it was true, maybe all the real nightmares were over, and she could finally recover, and spend a vaguely normal Christmas with the two boys she loved most in all the world, and Hopper, whatever he was to her. She wouldn't dive into that right now. After all, she thought, there'll be plenty of time for that.

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Jim Hopper got the call at eight-thirteen.

He was sitting in his living room, the the sound of some game show sounding from the television that he was ignoring. He had previously been staring at the presents on his coffee table, hands clasped under his chin in an anxious way that even he thought was uncharacteristic.

What am I even worried about, he thought. It's Joyce. She'll probably like whatever I get her.

Of course, despite trying to talk himself out of it, Hopper was worried. He was worried about Joyce and her sons liking his gifts for them, and he was worried about whether Christmas dinner would go well, or if his being there would make the whole thing a disaster. So when the phone rang, for a split second, he was grateful.

"Chief," the voice on the other end went. "There's been a road accident, no fatalities, but - "

"Why you telling me this, Grayson?" Hopper sighed. "If there's no fatalities, I'm sure you and the boys can take care of the paperwork. It's Christmas Eve, man, gimme a little peace."

"I was just about to say, sir," Grayson said. "It's Joyce Byers. She's got some real bad injuries, Chief, concussion, broken wrists, herny-somethin disks - they've taken her to the hospital in Indianapolis -

Hawkins General is shut for repairs and Christmas, but - ”

Hop had heard enough. He dropped the phone, ignoring Grayson’s tinny complaining voice through the line and grabbing his keys, because in that moment, the moment where Hopper’s stomach dropped about twenty feet, and his chest tightened in a way that he had never felt before, but he knew that it had something to do with the fact that he could lose Joyce Byers, he realised that as much as he tried to convince himself that Joyce was just his friend, there was, once again, more than that.

Much more.

The drive to the hospital was just over forty minutes without traffic, and Hop would say, if you asked, that it passed in a blur, but he would be lying. Every minute of the drive, Hopper’s mind was occupied, all of his thoughts somehow involving Joyce - what is her to him, what esteem does she hold him in (since when did he care about crap like that, anyway?) and, of course, would she be okay?

Hop’s stomach flipped when he even considered the other possibility.

When he arrived it was just after nine, according to the clock in the hospital foyer. He heard himself say a few words to the man at the information desk - words that sounded like “Joyce Byers”, “car accident”, “Hawkins” and “Severe injuries” - and found himself walking toward the waiting area, because apparently only immediate family was allowed to see patients in the ICU.

Hopper couldn’t believe himself. He was sitting in the waiting room of a hospital - which, after his experiences in life, was the last place he had pictured himself wanting to be - waiting for news about a woman who, on his life, he would swear he couldn’t care about. How much had changed in a year? When did Hopper going to Joyce’s for dinner become a weekly thing? When did he start helping Will with his history homework? When did his heart start leaping every time he knocked on the door of Joyce’s house?

He sighed, resting his throbbing forehead on his palm. This wasn’t Hopper’s area of expertise - He had met Diane on a blind date and they had been together from then up to the divorce. He wasn’t sure

how to like-like a woman.

"I sound like a teenager," Hopper muttered. He ran his hand through his rumpled hair, rising from his chair and pacing a few steps.

"Hopper?" A voice sounded behind him and he turned around, coming face-to-face with a very tired, very rumpled Jonathan. "What're you doing here?" He rubbed his eyes, taking in Hopper's appearance - ruffled shirt and two-day jeans, unbrushed hair and probably the breath of a chainsmoker - and put two and two together.

"Is she - " Hopper started, and Jonathan cut him off.

"She's still under observation. That car messed her up pretty bad. Two broken wrists, concussion at the very least, herniated disks, whiplash, the whole thing. The doctors are optimistic, though. They called Lonnie, but he hasn't arrived yet."

Hopper bristled. "Lonnie? What good's that gonna do? He doesn't give a damn what happens to Joyce."

Jonathan glanced at him, an odd look on his face. "Believe me, I know, but because he's our dad he's down as her next-of-kin. Prob'ly won't show up anyway." He muttered.

Hopper placed a hand on Jonathan's shoulder. "I know, kid." He sighed. Jonathan looked destroyed. In his eyes was the same dark hopelessness as when he believed his baby brother to be dead, and Hopper could tell that even though the doctors had hope for Joyce, Jonathan had spent the past two hours preparing himself for the worst. "Any chance I could... maybe see her?" Hopper scratched his head.

Jonathan gave him the ghost of a smile. "I can get you into the hallway. The room's off-limits for anyone except immediate family, but there was a thing... I had for you." he said. "There was a gift on the front seat of her car, it had your name on it," Jonathan pointed in down the hall with the sign above it that read 'TO: PAEDIATRICS, NICU, ICU'.

“Coming?”

Hopper didn't need to be told twice - he followed Jonathan down the hall, the sound of his shoes reverberating around the sterile white corridor.

It was only a short walk from the waiting area - not as many twists and turns as you would expect from a big, white, overbearing hospital - and Jim Hopper was standing in the last place he ever thought he would be when he woke up this morning, Jonathan Byers pressing a slightly dented and slightly charred box wrapped in red paper into his hands.

And so he sat in those weirdly uncomfortable plush-and-plastic chairs they have in hospitals, and he looked at the tag;

Hop - Merry Christmas!

Hope you like it!

With love,

Joyce

With a small smile, Hop lifted the lid from the box to reveal a brand-new, beautiful Stetson. Laughing a little, he could picture Joyce smiling as she picked it out, knowing that his last one was a little the worse for wear after crawling through a bush to rescue Mrs Fraser's cat a few weeks ago, and he couldn't imagine her picking anything less perfect.

Hopper was not a superstitious man, but his mother had always taught him that it was bad luck to wear hats indoors, and he didn't need any more bad luck at a time like this. So he placed the Stetson back in its box and stood at the window of Joyce's room, listening to the beeping of the machines, eyes lingering on the bloodied cuts on her face, the ones that were taped with butterflies but were jarring nonetheless.

He watched Will, who was curled up in the armchair chair beside Joyce - the comfy kind they give to the person who gets to stay with the patient overnight - his head resting on a pillow in a way that Hopper knew would give him grief tomorrow.

He watched Jonathan, head in his hands in the room's other chair, totally at a loss because this was his mom, and hadn't he been through enough, he had no clue how to begin to deal with this.

Hopper looked at those poor boys, who had been through hell and back, and he vowed to himself that he wouldn't let them go through this alone. No matter what happened, Jim Hopper would look out for Jonathan and Will because God, they needed it, especially now. He vowed to look after them.

For Joyce.

Notes for the Chapter:

First Jopper fic. First fic posted to AO3. Round of applause, anyone?

2. ii: jim hopper on the byers boys

10:29PM, December 24, 1984.

“You want coffee?”

Hop hadn't heard Jonathan emerge from Joyce's room. He nodded bleakly, standing and stretching his arms. There was an unspoken agreement between the two men that although both were dealing with tumbling, swirling emotions that probably needed to be talked about, neither would mention the elephant in the room. It was as if saying her name might jinx her.

Jonathan gave him a small smile - rather like the one you get given at funerals from people who don't know the deceased too well and only came out of respect - and started off down the hall without another word, slouched over, hands in his pockets and looking like he was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Hopper supposed he was.

+ + +

August 31, 1955.

“You are such an idiot, Hop!” Joyce cried, jumping out of the Chrysler and moving to inspect the damage, stamping her cig into the dirt on the side of the road. Hopper followed her, slamming the driver's side door in annoyance. He knew damn well that he was an idiot - but he wasn't about to admit that.

Joyce was knelt down by the wheel, her dark hair damp and blowing in the humid summer wind. “The hubcap's come clean off, and you're tail end's busted! No way do you have enough to cover this damage!” She said incredulously, looking up at him. Her cheeks were flushed with anger and the heat of the day, and there was no way that Hop was ready to deal with the voice in the back of his head that told him she looked pretty with pink cheeks and doe eyes and dark hair flying as he looked at her.

He decided to look down at his busted taillights instead, scuffing his feet into the dirt in anger. "Well it's not my fault, is it, Joyce? A pothole that big is damn hazard! Council should pay the fee!"

Joyce stood up, brushing down the front of her shirt. "Council doesn't pay for busted cars, Hop," she spat. "It barely even pays for roads! What are you gonna do?"

Hopper opened his mouth as if to speak, but then closed it again. In all honesty, he didn't know what he was going to do. If he came home with a busted car, his dad would probably shoot him - this car was expensive as hell, even though they got it secondhand, and when he had busted it this bad, he had basically signed his own death warrant.

"I don't know, Joyce," he muttered. "Okay? I don't know, but I'll figure something out. I always do, alright?"

Joyce folded her arms and sighed. "Hop... You don't always have to be this big, strong guy, you know? You can ask for people's help - you can ask for my help. How about a little trust here?"

Hopper had never been the kind of guy who liked asking for help, nor liked accepting it - it gave him a sense of failure, like the fact that he couldn't manage on his own meant he was unfit, or sub-par. He knew Joyce was the same - he had heard her scoffing at Karen Schwartz's damsel-in-distress voice not-so-subtly from behind her locker door enough times to know that - and he knew that trust was a hard thing for her, because she had felt such an amount of loss in such a short lifetime. Jim Hopper knew this.

So he knew how much it would mean to her to trust him. To admit to trusting him (even though, he supposed, she hadn't really). And with that knowledge, what else was he supposed to do, except for outstretch his arms and wrap this tiny, incorrigible girl into his chest and murmur two words into her delicately windswept hair.

"Thank you."

+ + +

11:59 PM, December 24, 1984.

“Hopper,” Jonathan said, his voice breaking the heavy silence. “It’s midnight - you should go home, people might need you...”

Hopper raised his head, a sense of arduousness in the movement, and glanced at the younger man. “Jonathan...” he sighed. “I don’t mind, kid. I don’t mind staying. Your dad isn’t about to show, is he? I can stay and keep an eye on Will.”

Jonathan opened his mouth, and then closed it again. Hopper thought he might know, somewhere in him, that Joyce meant more to him than he let on - more than a family friend, more than the guy who came round for dinner once a week and talked to Will about scientific conspiracies and to Jonathan about girls. But in all honesty, Hopper didn’t give a damn what Jonathan thought at this point - Joyce was unconscious in a hospital bed less than twenty feet from him, little stretches of white tape decorating her face and machines monitoring her heart rate and her breathing because she was in a position where those sorts of things were hanging in the balance - where they weren’t a given, where they weren’t what they usually were - taken for granted. Hopper could see her every heartbeat played out on a screen and he all could think was “What if she doesn’t make it?”

He didn’t have any room, anymore, to worry what Jonathan thought was between them.

“Thanks,” Jonathan murmured finally. “She’d appreciate it.”

Hopper just nodded in response.

Jonathan moved toward the sterile white door, his movements slow and weary. Placing a palm against the cool, smooth surface, he turned and looked back at Hop. “You want to come in?”

Hopper raised his head, as if not having heard him correctly. “Hm?”

“Mom’s room. You want to come in? I mean... if you’re not gonna leave, you may as well come in.” Jonathan scratched his head.

Hopper paused, then nodded, picking up his box and second coffee

and following Jonathan into Joyce's room.

His first impression was the noise. The ICU hall had been eerily quiet, the only sounds being the noises of the main hospital from down the corridor, muted by numerous walls and doors as if they tried to keep the dying away from the rest of the hospital. In Joyce's room, the window was open and even though it was near on midnight, Hopper could hear the traffic from the road below. Will was letting out a soft 'hmpf' every now and then in his sleep - he remembered (though he wasn't sure why) that Joyce had told him a few days previous about him showing some symptoms of a cold. Then there were the machines - they whirled and beeped in Hopper's peripheral vision - no matter how much he tried to tune them out (and he had had plenty of practice) there they stayed, ticking away around the edges of his consciousness.

His second impression was Joyce's presence - she had always been the kind of person who filled up a room, and he found it chilling that even in her state, even like this, she was the biggest person in that tiny room.

Hopper, after a glance at Jonathan, who had sat in the chair by the window and was looking out at the city, seemingly unaware of settled himself into the chair on the other side of Joyce's bed - opposite Will, nearly bumping his head on a monitor. He placed the Stetson's box carefully under his seat and folded his hands in his lap, listening to the tolling of church bells that had just begun somewhere in the street below.

"Merry Christmas, Hopper," Jonathan said, still facing out the window, the lights of Indianapolis glittering against the black curtain of the night sky.

"Merry Christmas, kid."

+ + +

31 August, 1955.

Joyce sat on the abandoned workbench of Richard Hammond, swinging her legs and watching Rich's son Benny attack Hop's

hubcaps with a spanner.

“Dunno how he did it, Joyce,” Benny teased. “His tail end’s totally screwed.”

“What I said,” Joyce hummed. “He drives like a damn maniac.”

Hop, standing by the door, arms folded with his weight leaning against the frame, let out an indignant exclamation. “What’s with the drive-by, Joyce?” Only the faintest hint of a smile hung around the corner of his mouth.

Benny cut in before the lady in question could respond with some quip or another. “Hop, mate, you have nothin’ to live for and you drive like it.” he grinned. A small smirk made its way to Joyce’s lips.

Benny was older than them - in his senior year - but he always had time for Hopper. The two had practically grown up together - Benny always outside, scuffing his dirty heels against Rich’s pristine hood and Hop lighting bugs on fire in the gutter with the magnifying glass he had begged his Aunt Jane for for Christmas (“For, um... science,” he had said when his aunt asked him why he wanted it). Benny taught Hopper how to pick locks when he was twelve and the two still met up for smokes behind the newsagent every once in a while, and Benny would tell Hop how whatever car he was fixing was coming along and Hop would reiterate with some story about the girls in his gym class, and it was fun, and it was easy. Hop appreciated Benny.

“I have plenty to live for,” Hop said, keeping his tone light and repressing certain... cheesy thoughts his brain was supplying.

Joyce’s swinging foot hit the metal of Rich’s bench, an ensuing bang echoing through the workshop. “Oh yeah?” She teased. “Like what?”

“I happen to be planning to ask Chrissy Carpenter out to see that new movie playing,” Hop replied. “And by ‘see that new movie playing’, I mean take her out to the back woods in the Chrysler and,” he wiggled his eyebrows, “See what happens.”

Joyce wrinkled her nose. “Gross, Hopper,” she said in disgust, “I was

thinking more along the lines of ‘my loving family,’ or ‘my bright future as an intellectual’, not ‘I plan on banging the class bimbo.’”

“First of all, I have no bright future as an intellectual -”

“We know that, mate,” Benny interjected.

“And my family all hates me. Except my Nana. I’m her favourite.” Hop said easily, tone teasing. “At least Chrissy knows how to make me happy - well, I’m guessing.”

Joyce jumped down from the bench, inspecting Benny’s work on the car. “You have issues, Jim Hopper. And someone better keep count, cause I’m not about to.”

+ + +

6:34 AM, December 25, 1984.

Hopper hadn’t slept.

Jonathan had - at some point in the early hours he had fallen victim to the tendrils of sleep, his head lolling down onto his shoulder at an angle that made Hop shudder just by looking at it. Hopper, however, hadn’t lost out and sat in the same chair, for hours on end, looking out at the twinkling lights of Indianapolis in what he wished he could say was a rare moment of contemplation.

He was only roused from his thoughts when Will - who had become in his peripherals nothing more than a dark blob surrounded by the faded maroon of the chair he was curled in - began to stir.

It was as if he didn’t immediately recognise his surroundings (Hopper supposed the previous night must have been some kind of blur for the poor kid) because he stretched out his limbs and rubbed his eyes, still with that vulnerability you only have when you’ve just woken, and murmured “Mom? Is it Christmas?”

Hopper’s heart ached for the poor kid as he began to realise where he was - he practically saw the memories replaying in Will’s eyes.

“Hey, kid,” Hopper murmured. “It’s Hop.”

Will sat more upright as consciousness returned, brushing some hair from his eyes. "Hop? What're you doing here?"

"I," Hopper hesitated. "I'm here to look after you until your mom gets better."

"You think she'll get better?" Will asked. The audible hope in his voice brought a swirling pool of emotions to the forefront - sometimes he forgot that Will and his friends were still just kids - with everything they'd seen, Hopper didn't think of them as children. But they were - they still needed something to hold on to, and Will needed his mom to hold on to.

(If Hopper was being totally honest, he didn't find the idea of having Joyce to hold on to half bad, either.)

"I do, kid," Hop gave Will a small smile, the kind that comes from a place of encouragement, and support. The kind you might get from a friend or a parent when you're anxious, or scared.

"I'm starving. Do you want me to get you something to eat? I'm sure this place has a cafeteria." Hopper stood and brushed down his front, trying (unsuccessfully) to smooth any wrinkles from his shirt and appear a little presentable. He glanced at the box sitting on the floor and contemplated putting the hat on, but decided against it.

Will nodded, still slightly stunned from sleep. His eyes were on his mom, and Hop saw the pain in them - the kind of pain that a thirteen-year-old boy shouldn't have to carry. Joyce's sons didn't deserve this. Hopper wasn't a religious man, but he prayed to whatever God that might be listening and that didn't have better things to do, to look after those damn boys.

Hopper was halfway out the door when Will's voice stopped him. "Bacon," he said.

"What?" Hopper asked.

"On Christmas morning, Mom would always make us bacon," Will said, glancing at Hopper with a perfectly serious, perfectly devastating look on his face.

Hopper nodded. "I'll see what I can do."

+ + +

5 September, 1955.

"I take it your ass didn't get slaughtered?"

Joyce's tone was teasing as she approached Hopper at his locker, Chemistry books clutched in her arms. Hopper turned around and flashed her a grin. "Nope. What did I say? Benny's a frickin genius."

"I don't recall that being what you said. I recall you saying "I'll figure something out" and then me suggesting we talk to Benny - your friend since childhood who happens to be the son of an auto mechanic."

Hopper returned this with a teasing glare, slamming his locker door shut. "You could've let me have that, you know. What did I ever do to you?"

"Gross me out way more than necessary, to be honest," Joyce laughed. "How was the back of the Chrysler with Chrissy Carpenter?"

"Invigorating, thanks," Hopper replied easily, the pair of them starting off down the hall together. "How was... whatever you do with your life when I'm not around?"

"It was extremely peaceful, especially with the lack of road accidents," she grinned. "I went to Indianapolis with some friends for Labor Day weekend. We got smokes and saw Rebel Without a Cause. It was good."

Hopper hummed, nodding. "Sounds good. Hey, you want to hang out this afternoon? I would offer to blow off gym but I can't miss Vicky Taylor in her gym clothes, and I at least owe you a pack of smokes for saving my ass."

"Gross. And sorry Hop, I can't," Joyce said as they reached the lab door. "I've got a date. Lonnie - you know Lonnie Byers - he's taking me to a drive in tonight to see something. I don't know what, but I'm actually kind of looking forward to it. Some other time?"

Hop leaned against the wall, trying to ignore whatever it was inside him that was saying that he should tell her not to go out with Lonnie (because what good reason did he have? He was in no position to tell Joyce who to date) and gave her a smile.

“Sure. Some other time.”

They never hung out alone again.

+ + +

6:48AM, December 25, 1984.

“Wheeler residence, this is Karen.”

“Hey, Karen, this is Jim Hopper. Chief Jim Hopper.” Hop spoke into the phone, leaning against the cafeteria wall and twisting the cord through his fingers.

“Hopper? What’s wrong? Why are you calling at - six forty-five on Christmas morning?” Karen said. Hopper could hear voices in the background - an excited Mike and Holly, probably, yelling about something or other.

“I need a favour,” He said. “Do you have Christmas lunch, or Christmas dinner?”

“Dinner,” Karen answered apprehensively. “Why?”

“I want to set up a Christmas lunch - don’t worry, you can bring the whole family. It’s for Joyce Byers and her family. I’ll fill you in...”

Notes for the Chapter:

hey guys! second chapter!

first of all, thank you so much for the kudos and the comments! it literally means so much to me!

second of all, I've decided this story will have five chapters (it's not a full, multi-chapter fic, it's not a one shot, it's somewhere in between) and I've already started on the next chapter and I PROMISE we will

see the boys and Nancy in the next chapter. promise.

I hope it'll be up in the next few days but i do have commitments (including but not limited to a birthday, a funeral and a bitching essay to write) so go easy.

3. iii. jim hopper on christmas

Karen Wheeler was an exceptionally punctual person, which, typically, surprised no-one.

This means that at twelve sharp she was pressing the silver button of the hospital elevator, a picnic basket weighted down by bread rolls and silver cutlery and clinking plates in her arms, her son and daughter trailing behind her in their Christmas clothes because Karen had insisted. For one of the first times in her life, she felt like she was doing the right thing.

“Hey, Mom?” Mike asked, adjusting the collar of his shirt - again. “What are we doing here? It’s Christmas. What’s going on?” Karen also hadn’t mentioned why they were at the hospital.

“Yeah, Mom, you’re starting to scare us,” Nancy said, interrupting the elevator’s placid ‘ding’ as it reached the ground floor. “Please. What’s going on?”

Karen sighed. The morning had been stressful to say the least - an early-morning phone call from the Chief of Police was certainly not how she had pictured Christmas morning starting, and then a fight with her husband and her children’s distress at being dragged from the house on Christmas day had all lumped together in her chest in a disturbing way that made her feel as if there was something lodged there that wouldn’t come out - the way she had felt when Will was missing all those months ago and she was taut with worry.

The trio stepped into the elevator, Nancy’s pumps clacking on the hard linoleum floor of the hospital. Karen opened her mouth, beginning to speak, and then closing it, unsure how to say “Joyce Byers, a woman who I have known my whole life but never truly known is in the hospital and I’m not sure if she’ll be okay, and her poor kids don’t deserve this, and the Chief of Police cares about her family enough to call me at six forty-five in the morning and this is all just way to surreal for me to comprehend, let alone repeat to my children,” in a way that she would deem appropriate, for Christmas, no less.

“Mom?” Nancy repeated. “What’s going on?”

“Will’s mom...” Karen began, taking a deep breath and trying not to look too wholly at her children’s faces. “Was in a car accident last night. The doctors aren’t sure if she’s going to be okay.”

Nancy and Mike were silent. They didn’t react in any noticeable way, at first, but Karen knew her children. Nancy’s eyes widening, rolling back on the balls of her feet, and Mike’s mouth opening a little as he bowed his head - they were shocked. To their core. Karen could tell.

“I got a phone call, this morning,” she continued. “To see if I could do something... bring some Christmas lunch for those poor boys. So I thought it would be nice for us to come together, maybe cheer them up a little.”

The children were still silent, but Nancy nodded a little, pursing her lips and gripping the wicker handle of her basket slightly tighter, as told by the whitening of her knuckles.

The elevator announced its arrival at the second floor with another small ‘ding’, and the trio stepped out in silence, Karen glancing down at the paper in her hand, which she had scrawled Joyce’s room number on (208, intensive care) and placing a hand on Mike’s shoulder as they walked. For reassurance.

Hopper greeted them outside the door. He looked a little worse for wear, his shirt a little rumpled and his hair looking as if it had been tugged and pulled by anxious hands for hours. Through the glass Karen could see Jonathan and Will curled in the chair beside Joyce, Jonathan’s arms around his little brother.

“Hi, Hopper,” Karen smiled, something sad in it.

“Hey, Karen,” Hopper said, “I’m glad you came. Merry Christmas. Uh, hey Nancy, hey Mike.”

Nancy and Mike mumbled their awkward hellos, looking down at the white floor. Karen had failed to mention Hopper’s being there, and while the town of Hawkins as a conglomerate had begun to draw their own conclusions about Joyce and Hopper - it wasn’t as if

Hopper was successfully hiding the fact that he had feelings for her (probably, he told himself, there's no need to get all serious) and Karen had definitely begun to make some conclusions of her own, Nancy and Mike were assumed (incorrectly) to be more oblivious to these things.

Nancy was more occupied with regaining control over her writhing stomach than noting Hopper's presence there - in her mind, he had kind of become inducted into the Byers family in a weird, not-totally-explainable way, however the fact that she was about to be faced with her fourth-worst nightmare (she had made an optimised list - 1. The return of the monster from a year and a half ago, 2. Her whole family dies, 3. She fails all of her classes at the end-of-year exams, 4. She is faced with Jonathan Byers in a totally unavoidable and inexorable way) and there was absolutely no way to dilute or circumvent.

Mike was also immersed in his own thoughts that were also not related to Will's mom and the police chief - to be honest, while Mike was observant and could most definitely tell things were not the same as they'd been a year and a half ago between the two adults - starting with the fact they were speaking - he was just a little out of the age range to care about these kinds of things, and he cared more about making sure his friend - who had been through more than enough already - was okay.

"You guys wanna come in?" Hopper said, opening the door wide, allowing the family to step inside. "I mean, it's technically family only but I've been in here since about one in the morning and it's Christmas, so..."

Karen and Mike ducked under Hopper's arm and into the room, not totally heeding what he had said, while Nancy hung back a little. She wasn't sure why - she knew there was no avoiding going in, but she had literally learned all of this new, shocking information five minutes ago and it had been kind of a rough time in the five minutes since. Plus - the Jonathan thing.

Nancy sucked in a breath and loosened her vice-like grip on her picnic basket, gathering her strength (this wasn't where she had imagined being when she woke up to Mike's all-too-rare laughter this

morning) and followed Hopper into Joyce's hospital room, trying to push the image of bereft Jonathan with his head in his hands out of her mind.

+ + +

Hopper wasn't sure what he had expected when he telephoned Karen - refusal? Dismissiveness? He didn't know the woman very well - they had gone to high school together, but had never really clicked. He supposed he didn't very well have much of a right to assume what she would do, but he hadn't expected what he had gotten. Karen had immediately agreed to help, to come to support Will and Jonathan, and while Hopper was surprised, he had never been the kind of man to turn down an offer as generous as Karen's (she offered to bring lunch, and her family, and stop by Joyce's house and get the boys some fresh clothes) especially when he had been the one to issue a request.

"Hey, Karen," he said, leaning against the door. There was more noise in the corridor than there had been the previous night - families visiting for Christmas, he supposed. "I'm glad you came. Merry Christmas. Uh, hey Nancy, hey Mike."

Nancy and Mike returned the sentiment awkwardly, Mike scuffing at the linoleum with his shoes.

"You guys wanna come in?" Hopper asked, pushing the door open wide with his palm. "I mean, it's technically family only but I've been in here since about one in the morning and it's Christmas, so..."

Karen was already ducking under his outstretched arm with her basket, Mike on her heels, scratching at his collar. Nancy lingered a moment, hesitant to enter. Hopper wasn't sure why - there was nothing in there to be afraid of - but then sucked in a breath and followed suit. Hopper knew this probably wasn't where she wanted to spend her Christmas, so he didn't question her.

The tiny room was a little stuffy with six people, three of whom were milling around awkwardly, Mike rolling back on the balls of his feet and avoiding looking at Joyce.

"Hey Will," Mike said, rousing the boy in question from some kind of deep thought. The nurse had been by earlier to check on Joyce, and she kindly took away the empty breakfast plates Hopper had brought up, so the only evidence of their Christmas morning cafeteria breakfast was the smudge of barbecue sauce on Will's chin when he looked up.

"Hi, Mike," he gave his friend a small smile. "Merry Christmas." Will budged over in the chair a little and made space for Mike to sit. He did, opening the lid of his picnic basket (Hopper detected a delectable smell) and pulled out a comic to show his friend. Hopper guessed Mike had brought it to attempt to cheer his friend up - whether it was working, however, was anyone's guess.

Karen began busying opening windows to let out some of the heat (and to inadvertently let in some carols being sung on the street below), setting the picnic basket in her arms down in the last spare chair and pulling out the tempered glass crockery and silver cutlery and placing it on Joyce's tiny unused bedside table with the kind of efficiency that only comes from years of parenthood.

"Uh, Karen," Hop said, pulling her aside momentarily when Jonathan and Nancy were distracted - "I just wanted to say thanks for all of this. I really appreciate it, and I'm sure... I'm sure she would too."

Karen's eyes unwillingly moved to Joyce's motionless form, and she gave Hopper a sad smile. "It's okay. I'm sure she would do it for me, and it's the least I can do for her boys."

He had a feeling that there was something there that Karen was leaving unsaid, but he couldn't blame her. He knew, from too much close personal experience, that at these kinds of times, people left enough unsaid to fill a mountain. There was something about the assumed fragility of the bereaved and the relations of the sick that irked Hopper - because he was many things (irresponsible, emotional, and he would go as far as to say a trainwreck) but one thing he had never been was fragile. He had been resilient enough to take the news of a terminally ill daughter, a divorce, and multiple disturbing cases as a big cop - he could take almost anything, he thought. But it was more than that.

After all, everyone in Hawkins had been talking about Joyce and Hopper for a long time - in the fashion of tiny, stereotypical Americana towns, very little happened that was apparently more interesting to gossiping school fair moms and plumbers who came to fix Karen's shower and the two old ladies who always sit at the bus stop on Second St than the police chief's personal relationship with 'that poor boy's mother'.

Small towns are wont to talk like this, after all, and it wasn't as if Hopper didn't know about it. Hopper knew what people were saying. He knew what the cops in his office would say before Flo would rap them over the head with her address book. He used to say to himself that this didn't make it true.

He knew that he definitely had some feelings for her. Despite this crap. Despite everything he had told himself. Despite all the warnings and stops he had put in for himself - despite all the opportunities to pause and tell himself - Hopper, no. Don't do this.

The odd feeling which his stomach had housed since yesterday told him that yes, he had very much done that. The tugging at his heartstrings when he had stood in the hallway last night and looked at her, lying, unmoving in the bed, had told him that. The hours he had spent staring at the roughly wrapped present on his coffee table, on a day that now felt a million years ago, told him that.

He was totally, utterly screwed. And there was a part of him that was afraid he wouldn't be resilient enough for this.

"Okay," Karen clapped her hands, snapping Hopper out of his thoughts. "We have coleslaw, ham and turkey from the deli on Main St, some nice, seedy bread rolls, potato salad with egg and bacon, some soda for drinks and some carrot cake for dessert. Will, Mike, sweetie, what do you want?"

Mike told his mother what he wanted - Hopper didn't take much notice - and Jonathan, who had been sitting cross-legged on the floor (having given up his seat to Nancy) untangled himself and joined Karen over the picnic basket and fished out some bread rolls, spooned out some salads, retrieved some cold cuts and arranged them on two plates. Nancy took hers with a small smile and a quiet thank

you.

Hopper couldn't hear what the two were talking about, but he knew that they had dropped their facade of fake cheerfulness and amicability - there was too much history between the two for that, Hopper had thought. He was glad they agreed.

Without much sense of self - his thoughts were much too occupied at present for that - he placed some cold ham and coleslaw on a plate, placing a fork down with a 'clink' onto its surface. He chose to sit at the foot of the bed, where he could feel Joyce's weight and make it feel a little more real - like she was real, and whole, and human and Joyce, not just a projection of his fears in a hospital bed.

He wasn't sure what he had expected when he had called Karen. Maybe he wasn't expecting anything. He had just wanted to somehow make it Christmas, because spending the day in hospital wasn't exactly what would be called festive. And maybe when Karen and Nancy and Mike had arrived he had been expecting awkward silences, because that's what he would have thought would come with this scenario, but it wasn't like that. Surprisingly.

Karen asked Mike and Will about their science project and they had responded enthusiastically, telling her about the things they were making and why they were making them, and Nancy asked Jonathan about his photography and if he had heard about his NYU application for next fall, and Hopper told the boys the story of the one time Mrs James had made him dive into the lake which was really in the jurisdiction of the next town over to save her very feisty, very angry cat (he remembered showing up at Joyce's the next day and her doubled over in laughter, because the parts of his face that weren't covered in beard were pink and raw from cat scratches, and he remembered her joke about how yes, police is a very dangerous line of work. And he remembered pretending to be indignant but really being a little bit pleased because that week she had worked three doubles and was run raw and it was nice to see her laugh, but he didn't add this to the story because "get it together, man") and the boys laughed, and for a moment, for one, shining Christmas moment, Hopper stepped out of his pessimist shell and truly believed that everything might be okay.

It wasn't.

Notes for the Chapter:

I KNOW. THIS TOOK FOREVER AND IT'S SO SHORT.
I'M SORRY.

but i haven't forgotten about it. i promise more is coming and i will finish this fic. by the way, to everyone who has left comments i was going to respond individually but i totally spaced and i just want you to know that THAT MEANS SO MUCH TO ME. each and every one made my day. also kudos. to anyone who has left kudos, i love you.

also it's 4:30 in the morning and i should probably go to sleep. but thank you so much. seriously.

4. iv. jim hopper on joyce byers

Notes for the Chapter:

(before you read this chap, be aware that a) this is unedited and b) this is canon-based with a twist. that twist is even though hopper 100% wanted to date joyce in high school, they didn't technically go out. i'm not sure if everyone agrees that is canon but i definitely do so yes, that fact makes this story [and its general premise] a little au. please enjoy anyway.)

Joyce's breathing began to deteriorate a little while after Karen, Nancy and Mike left, with the promise to visit again soon. Even though there was nothing - nothing - about this that was any kind of normal, after the Wheelers had left, and the sky had begun to darken, and frost began decorating the edges of the roads, things had begun to feel stable.

Of course, Hopper was doing a good job of trying to ignore the fact that Joyce's condition was, still on paper, unchanged. He wasn't the only one. Will had been trying a more optimistic outlook as well, but whereas Hopper could barely look at Joyce without an odd feeling tugging in his chest that yes, he admitted was there but was still denying meant anything, Will was reading to her.

When Will first opened his book ('The Two Towers' - Hopper recalled Joyce mentioning him making his way through the Lord of the Rings trilogy over coffee one afternoon) and began to read, Hopper turned to Jonathan and shot him a questioning look - he didn't have to say a word before Jonathan spoke softly, "When I was sick when I was little, and whenever Will's sick, she always reads to us. Even if she doesn't have time."

That sounded very much like something Joyce would do.

But after a while, painful thoughts and memories began to seep back into Hopper's mind - memories aching - aching similar to this. Memories of reading to a little girl in a hospital bed just like this, a bed too big for her small frame, and telling her she would be okay in

soothing, hushed whispers and meaning those words more as a comfort to his own restless mind - if he couldn't convince himself of it, who could he convince?

But, of course, she hadn't been okay. He had lied. He had lied to himself. But worse, he had lied to her. He had lied to Sarah. And Sarah had died knowing that.

"I, uh," Hopper grunted, rising from his chair. "I gotta get some air."

Jonathan gave a little, almost imperceptible nod. Will didn't respond at all - his voice wasn't loud enough to fill the room, but he continued to read to Joyce, curled up beside her in that giant maroon chair that made him look ever smaller than he already was.

As soon as Hopper stepped outside the hospital doors, he pulled his pack from his pocket and lit a smoke. It was freezing out, but Hopper wasn't quite sure what he had expected. It was the middle of December. He folded one arm around his midriff and raised the cigarette to his lips with shaking fingers.

He wasn't the kind of man to question fate. He wasn't the kind of man who even believed in fate, or destiny, or even religion, though he had his own turn on the external damnation thing. One couldn't go through what Hopper had gone through without having rung up some kind of karmic tab. He didn't exactly like that idea, but it was the closest thing to any kind of religion he had - the stupidly self-sacrificing belief that he was living in Hell to pay for his own previous sins. It gave him the feeling that he was working toward some kind of goal - that maybe, one day, his debt would be paid and he would be able to be happy.

But Joyce. Joyce didn't deserve this. Hopper knew Joyce didn't deserve any of the lots life had given her - Lonnie, the poverty, the scathing words behind her back and to her face, everything with Will and now this? Even him, he sometimes thought, though he would never say that aloud. He wondered sometimes, when his thoughts were no more necessarily occupied, whether Joyce deserved him as a friend, or whatever he was to her. The answer was almost always what he didn't want to hear.

And so, outside Hopper stood, bitterly cold wind searing his face and just over its infernal howling Hopper could still hear carols, except now the people in the church a few blocks over were chorusing 'Silent Night', and Hopper thought that it was more fitting than Jingle Bells or, God forbid, Mannheim Steamroller, because it was a silent night, and he closed his eyes and uttered a silent prayer to a God he didn't quite believe in that it would be a holy night, too.

He stood out in the frost for far too long, lost in his thoughts and not really there - not there enough to pay any heed to the Hawkins woman who hurried past him into the hospital, calling her surprised hellos over her shoulder - and by the time he realised that he had been standing, shivering, in the same spot for much too long for a night like that, he had begun to lose the feeling in his fingers.

He headed back inside, and at first, the hurriedness of the doctors in the lobby and the elevators didn't strike any chords with him. This was a hospital - there were emergencies all the time, someone was probably pressing a red button somewhere and all of the doctors were rushing to their aid. He barely spared a thought to where they might be going - that was, until he stepped out of the lift on the ICU Ward, and watched the doctors scurry like harried ants along the corridor, scampering in and out of her room. Jonathan was standing just outside the door, clutching Will's head to his chest. The boy was shaking with sobs, and Jonathan was resting his chin on Will's head, his hands stroking the kid's hair in a way so reminiscent of his mother it hurt.

Hopper's heart jumped into his throat - he left the building for five damn minutes - and he crossed the distance in quick strides. He didn't need to ask a single question - Jonathan's eyes told him everything he needed to know.

Doctors were yelling nonsense words, the heart monitor was screaming its discontent - in that moment, the whole world seemed to be engulfed by the commotion in that small hallway, and Hopper looked at Joyce, he looked at how deceptively small and fragile she looked in that bed and his arms reflexively wrapped themselves around Jonathan and Will, and he hoped to God that Will's shaking form against his chest couldn't feel the terrified pounding of his heart.

I've just come to terms with this, he thought. I've just come to terms with this, and I'm going to lose her. Again.

+ + +

Jim Hopper was always in Joyce Byers' orbit.

Their mothers attended the same playgroup. They were in the same class all through grade school. When Joyce's mom died, Jim's family went to her funeral.

In high school, they were closer. They were friends but never good ones - they were that friend, to each other, that you keep telling each other you need to hang out with more but you never do. Then Joyce started dating Lonnie and somehow, their whole, poised-to-be-special friendship fell apart.

At the time, Hopper hadn't realised what made their growing friendship crash and burn. Hell, he hadn't even realised it had crashed and burned. But almost thirty years, three children, two exes and a Stephen-King-worthy story later, the truth would reveal itself. Hopper had a habit of having epiphanies a little too late.

After Hopper moved away, chasing a stellar career in the New York Police Department, he lost touch with Joyce. His life became his job - it was less glamorous than talked up to be, but Hopper didn't mind - and then it became his wife, Diane, and then his daughter, Sarah. And then, in what he would come to call spectacular Jim Hopper fashion, it crashed and it burned.

Really, what had he been expecting?

+ + +

Hawkins, Indiana. 1978.

"Welcome back, Hop!" An old drinking mate raised a scotch to the man as he entered Hawkins' dirtiest, scroungiest watering hole. "Long time, no see, eh?"

A small chorus of greetings and agreements echoed around the bar.

“Hey, gents,” He flashed a trademark grin - a trademark grin of a different Hopper, a Hopper that hadn’t been broken yet - “What’ve I missed?” Hopper waved to the bartender for a beer.

“Not much, buddy,” Pat Jenkins, who ran the newsagent, spoke up from the bar stool opposite him, punctuating the sentence with a friendly slap to Hopper’s back. “Eric Somerset got arrested a few years back for drunk and disorderly and his missus made him kick the booze, ol’ Stevie passed away a few months back and Lonnie Byers ditched that wife of his and ran off to Cincinnati or something.”

This was the first news Hopper had heard of Joyce in just under twenty years. And he could try and deny it all he wanted, but there was some part of him that felt glad, glad that Lonnie and his poison was far, far away. He had absolutely zero claim on Joyce, and he knew this, but he had a feeling in the pit of his stomach (if he had known better, he would have tried to quash it) that told him he was happy that Lonnie no longer had any claim on Joyce either.

The bartender brought Hopper his brew, and he raised it against Pat’s. “Not much, eh? It’s the most drama Hawkins’s had since the bloody suicide in the sixties.”

Pat chuckled. “Whatever you say, mate. We’ll miss those bastards.”

“To missing those bastards,” Hopper replied, clinking the neck of his bottle against his mate’s.

In all honesty, Hopper wouldn’t miss them at all.

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He didn’t find out Joyce had kids until a few weeks later.

He was on patrol in town one night, not really paying attention because the radio was on and it was covering the match that was on that night, a match he semi-cared about and he gave more damns about that than if any kid drunk off his ass was going a few miles over the speed limit down Hawkins Main St at eleven on a Wednesday night.

However, even Hopper, with all of his moral ambiguity, could not let

a small green car going double the pace it should through town, get out from under his nose. He had a duty of care to the community, after all, and even though it was unlikely the idiot would hurt anyone else (it was eleven, on a Wednesday) whoever they were, they were a danger to themselves.

He kicked the rover into gear, and flashing his lights, he sped after them. It was clear they were trying to ignore Hopper was there, but there was only so long you could ignore a flashing cop car in your rearview mirror before there was a chance of you being arrested. The small car pulled over to the side of the road, and Hopper got out and strode over, prepared to issue a ticket to some tipsy idiot, probably running home from a night at the Royal, the nicer pub in town.

He wasn't prepared to see a trembling Joyce Byers sitting behind the wheel.

"I'm so sorry, officer, I - Hopper?" She looked up at him in confusion. She clearly hadn't heard he was back. "What - "

"You were speeding like all hell, Joyce." He raised an eyebrow. "What are you doing out so late?"

"What are you, my mom?" She spat. "I really need to get home, so could we please just save the questions for another time, because believe me, I have questions. Last I heard, you were some big-city cop, miles away from here."

"Well, it's a long story," Hopper grinned, ignoring the nostalgia bubbling in his chest at the sight of her comically angry expression. "I take it the reason you were doing double the limit right through town at eleven at night isn't quite so lengthy."

"I worked a double shift and I need to get home," she said, using the patronising tone of voice you might use to explain something to a young child. "I have two sons under the age of twelve who are home, by themselves, and I don't need more people thinking I'm a shit mother because I have to work overtime to support them and am only able to get home long past their fucking bedtimes. Now would you please either give me a ticket or get out of my damn way?"

Joyce had kids? For some reason, Hopper had never considered this. It wasn't as if it was beyond the realms of any possibility - he had just never thought Joyce would settle for a guy like Lonnie - a guy who Hop had clear memories of catcalling blondes outside the Scorpion, a guy who probably only stayed with Joyce for respectability - so he didn't become those guys in the pub, those unmarried guys who most considered the scum of the town, those guys that Hopper probably belonged to now - he hadn't pictured Joyce marrying and having children with a guy like that.

He sighed deeply. "I'm not gonna give you a ticket, Joyce," he said, leaning his arm against her window. "Just... drive safe, okay? It'd be a shame for those kids to have to grow up without a mom."

Joyce started a little in surprise - kindness had clearly become a little foreign to her over time - but she composed herself quickly, and if Hopper hadn't known her in one way or another since before she could walk, he wouldn't have picked up on it.

"Well, thank you," She nodded at him, her fingers gripping the wheel, her jaw set and her muscles tense. Someone - Hopper had one bet on who - had run all of the looseness, the carefree energy out of the Joyce he remembered. He wondered what her long story was - what he had missed all those years he had lost touch with her. What happened to the girl who kicked her feet against Richard Hammond's workbench and teased him about his driving and his teenage conquests, to make her so... different? What weight was there sitting on her shoulders?

"It's no trouble," he said. "See you around, Joyce."

He slapped the metal frame of the car as a goodbye and began to walk back to the rover, the sounds of crickets buzzing in his ears, when Joyce yelled after him, "Hop! It's nice to have you back!" Before speeding off into the darkness at a speed that would technically still have been over the limit.

Maybe it would be nice to be back, too.

+ + +

Indianapolis, 1984.

Hopper thought the screaming of the heart monitor was bad.

Its silence as Joyce flatlined was worse.

Hopper's heart leapt into his throat - mark the day, he thought, 25 December, 1984 - the day a meaningless man in a meaningless city on a meaningless planet lost any hope in any God, because a meaningless woman was lying, technically dead in a hospital bed.

Will screamed. Not a high-pitched, Alfred-Hitchcock-movie scream, a low, mournful scream that you felt in your bones, the kind of scream that you hope will never escape your lungs because it means something dreadful, something horribly, exquisitely dreadful that can never be undone or forgotten has happened. The kind of sound Diane made when the doctors wrote Sarah off as officially deceased.

Hopper watched the doctors rip the blankets from Joyce's bed and begin compression on her heart. One, two, three four. One, two, three, four.

"Please," Hopper murmured, the sound choked and muffled as he breathed it out into Jonathan's shoulder. "Oh, God, please."

One, two, three, four.

One, two, three, four.

The heart monitor gave a start.

One, two, three, four.

One, two, three, four.

The commotion was loud, and boisterous and and close to Hopper's ears, but the sound of Joyce's hacking coughs as she came to were louder and clearer to him than any of it.

Joyce was alive.

Will hiccupped, and Jonathan gave a burst of hysterical laughter,

hugging his little brother tighter than before and saying “Mom’s okay, Mom’s okay, Mom’s okay!” into his hair over and over again.

Hopper let go of the two of them, patting Jonathan on the back, and finally releasing the breath he didn’t realise he had been holding. Joyce was in a hospital bed. She had more injuries than Hopper could count on his left hand. She would likely need weeks of rehabilitation and medical attention that would cost a small fortune neither of them had. This was far from a happy ending, but Hopper didn’t care, because she was alive, and it wasn’t too late, and he must have done something right, somewhere, because he didn’t lose Joyce. And he wasn’t about to let her go.

He pushed open the door for Jonathan and Will - the pair practically sprinted to their mother’s side, Will talking at a mile a minute and Jonathan gripping his mother’s good wrist so tight his knuckles turned white - and stepped inside as well, hovering back a little and letting the boys have their moment with their mom.

Joyce was still barely with it, but she was there enough to try and lean forward to kiss her eldest son’s hand, to smile - albeit slightly painfully - at her younger son’s ramblings, and there enough for her eyes to flick to Hopper’s, which he hadn’t realised until that moment were swimming with unshed tears. There was so much emotion in her expression that Hopper couldn’t decode it all - but one that was definitely present on her face under the bruises and the butterflies, and one that Hopper was certain was mirrored in his own, was thankfulness. Whether it was to Hopper, for being there for her sons, or to the doctors, for the medical miracle or even to God, Hopper knew that Joyce was thankful. Grateful. It was a damn Christmas miracle.

“Joyce Byers,” he said, even though there was no way Joyce would hear him, “don’t you ever do that to me again.”

Notes for the Chapter:

happy chapter update!! yay!!

i feel like i didn't update this that long ago, but it's been, like, over a week?? happy october! for my

fellow aussies (that aren't in queensland) happy daylight savings!

this week i showed my best friend stranger things and she loved it (she ended up staying the night at my place because we binged the whole thing and stayed up until 2 - pretty sure we pissed off my neighbours with our screeching) but i think she gave me a cold. dammit.

hope you enjoyed the chapter, i actually now have 10,000+ words of jopper angst on my profile. fantastic!

this is also periodically updated on my personal tumblr which is gradually just turning into a kabby and jopper trashcan and it's also on @strangerthingsfics.

5. v. joyce byers on jim hopper

Life doesn't doll out cards based on your moral code of conduct. That's not how it works.

The universe doesn't look into the future and tally up all the sins you're going to commit and feed you karmic retribution in the form of a horrible, weighted past to carry. The people least deserving of these kinds of things are often the ones who have to bear them. This was the reason Joyce Byers was never one for organised religion. She liked to believe that if there was a God, he would be a little more forgiving.

When Joyce was ten, her mother passed away. Her father loved her, sure, but he was never the same after that - he became surly and depressed, and there was always at least one empty bottle of spirits lying in the kitchen sink. Eventually it became a little too much - trying to parent her parent had become exhausting, and her grades had started falling, and she moved out when she realised she had been spending more time on Lonnie's couch than in her own bed.

Hawkins loved talking about Joyce. She was an interesting specimen, one of the few in a sleepy town where to be different was to be ostracised. Her parents had moved there from another little town in the middle of nowhere, and the three of them lived in a quaint house in the middle of town, and her father worked assistant manager at the bank and her mother stayed at home, as in every stereotype ever made about the American family. But they weren't fake. They weren't family-of-four at the end of the cul-de-sac and soccer mom and PTAs. They were nice, real people. And then Joyce's mom died, and people talked, and they never really stopped.

Because after that Joyce dated Lonnie, and then she married Lonnie, a twenty-two year old high school dropout who hung around town, smoking in the local watering hole. People shook their heads and said what a shame, what a shame that a girl from a nice family could go so far astray. And then, Lonnie, like the slug everyone knew he was but nobody called out, not once, abandoned her and her two sons for booze and Joyce was talked about again, because she was a single mother, spread too thin and ground down to dust, because suffering is the the thing people like to talk about the most.

And because suffering is the thing people like to talk about the most, when Joyce Byers' name came up once again as a result of her missing son, the town, as small towns full of stereotyped elderly ladies with nothing better to do than gossip in the queue at the drug store are wont to do, talked. Again.

Joyce was tired of this. She wasn't angry. She wasn't upset. She was just really goddamn tired. There's only a certain amount of loss you can carry on your shoulders before it begins to crush you, and Joyce was horribly afraid that Will was her limit. She did not need church ladies telling her how to run her life. She did not need cashiers at the store offering their views on her skills as a mother. She did not need police officers commenting on her friendship - or whatever they thought it was, or whatever it actually was, because Joyce was afraid to even go there - with Hop. She did not need any of this.

And then, somehow, miraculously, things started to get better. They were almost back to normal, but something had shifted, something small. Maybe the something small was people looking at Joyce differently when she crossed the street, looking at her with an emotion that had become foreign to her over the past twenty years - respect. Maybe it was the sudden extra love and appreciation that had blossomed in the Byers family since the incident - the shared affection and renewed presence in each other's lives that most families lacked, that they had begun to lack, back with a vengeance.

But Joyce's subconscious was leaning toward pinning it on the near-daily visits from Hop, who seemed to be oblivious to the fact that Joyce actually wanted him there and felt the need to invent a new excuse every time he arrived, at least for a while.

At first it was to check up on Will, to make sure there was no kind of aftermath from his time in the 'Upside Down', as Mike Wheeler had called it in a very serious voice in the Hawkins General waiting room. Then it was to make sure Joyce was adjusting back to work okay, then it was to fix Joyce's wall, or to feed her dog because 'he thought she was out', or to check up on Jonathan to make sure he was keeping out of trouble. It took nearly a full year for him to run out of excuses - by the time Halloween 84' rolled around, Joyce had noticed he had stopped showing up at her door with a hammer, or dog food, or some cool police photographs to show Jonathan - he had just started showing up, and that was enough.

It was like there had never been twenty years of unshared history between them - they clicked like they always had, and for the first time since a night from Joyce's childhood she could so clearly remember (being tangled in her mother's arms for the last time, her father curled around her mother like some kind of smallest-to-biggest ripple of bodies) she began to feel a calmness in her chest, like things weren't rushed, or tinged with negativity and worry. For the first time in a long time, there was someone to share in the beauty and the sadness and the horror and joy who knew her, and she could pause to take a breath.

After twenty years tied to Lonnie, and all the heartache and fast-paced anxieties and metaphorical (and literal) throbbing in her head that that came with, it was a breath of fresh air to be able to pause, to look around, to savour the moment. And she was only able to let herself do that because Hop was there, and she trusted him, she

trusted him beyond anyone but her own flesh and blood, and because he was the reason the only quickening of her heart in the past few months had been when the pair stood at the memorial Mike Wheeler had created for Eleven, and his hand slipped into hers.

Joyce was carefully preventing herself from thinking too deeply about her relationship with Hop - they had found a calm and pleasing-yet-precarious balance in their affection. Holding hands probably crossed that line but Joyce didn't think about that too much - it was as if she was afraid to let herself want Hop, because then everything they had worked for would come crumbling down in pieces. And she absolutely refused to let that happen.

Christmas Eve, 1984.

Flo was showing Joyce a hat. A hat that would be absolutely perfect - Joyce didn't know what she would do without that woman - she had saved her ass more times than she could count on her fingers in the last few months alone, and there wasn't enough fingers in the world to count the times that Flo, despite in all her frustration and easy teasing - had been there for Hop when Joyce hadn't.

"It's... perfect," Joyce stammered, a smile playing on her lips. "Thank you, Flo."

"It's no trouble," the other woman murmured. "I'm sure whatever you get him will be fine. He thinks the world of you, you know."

Similar things had been said behind Joyce's back all over town, and it wasn't as if she didn't know about it. But Joyce hadn't developed a

strategic plan for dealing with these things head-on, and she was left in a terrible position of stammering in surprise, a flush creeping up her neck.

“Flo... I don’t think - he, I mean - ”

“Oh, don’t you worry, sweetheart,” Flo waved a hand, taking the hat down off the shelf and examining it. “I promised I wouldn’t say anything about it, but it’s not like there’s much point, is there? Everyone can tell from that stupid face he makes when you walk into a room.”

All that was said was said absentmindedly, but the words hit Joyce like a ton of bricks. Hop liked her? This wasn’t right, this wasn’t allowed. This was dangerous, unknown territory. Even if it were true - which the self-protecting, pessimistic part of Joyce didn’t quite believe - she had been putting off figuring out her side of whatever this was, putting off figuring out her feelings. In truth, she didn’t know what she felt. Or maybe she just didn’t want to acknowledge what she felt.

Joyce looked down at the ground - she didn’t consider herself a timid person, quite the contrary - but she didn’t quite know how to reply.

“Thank you for your help, Flo,” Joyce mumbled, with a smile. Flo returned it, and then announced that she was in desperate need of something from the store over the road and handed Joyce the Stetson. She had a way about her, Flo, that made her hard to contradict, and Joyce wasn’t sure that she wanted to.

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Jim Hopper was not, in his youth, the sort of man shrouded in mystery. He was a small town boy who had absolutely zero ambitions except for 'get out of Hawkins'. He had nothing particular to recommend him - he wasn't a bookworm, or the studious kind, but he passed class easily enough. He wasn't a jock, but he did track and was decent enough looking to escape any teasing. He kept his head down, and hung with Benny, his other mates, occasionally Chrissy and her posse when they couldn't score anything better - and yet, Joyce noticed him.

She wasn't really sure why - he wasn't Lonnie Byers, hitting on her every other day (though in good fun), or any of the horrid guys in her class who drew attention to themselves by making unflattering comments about her in gym. He was just Hop. He was always around. He was in her class when they were children, in middle school he was her science partner for a few months when Benny broke his leg and couldn't walk for eight weeks. When Joyce's mom passed, he was there for her. Kind of.

They were almost friends for a minute in high school. "Hey, Hop!" she would yell at the back of his head from her spot in the second-from-back row, accompanied by a scrunched up piece of paper hitting his shoulder. "You know Mr Mathews is asleep, right? You don't need to take notes!"

"I know," Hopper would retort, dropping his pencil onto the desk and ignoring Benny's sniggers from the desk one aisle over. "I'm not taking notes!"

"Then what are you writing?" Joyce would shimmy out of her seat

with a grin and perch herself on Benny's desk. "Is it a love letter?" And then Joyce would try and grab the paper from his hand, which would amuse the portion of the class not following Mr Mathews' example, and because even then Hopper had a foot of height on her, she never would find out what he was writing about.

That was their dynamic, and it was good. They were friends, but not close friends. They might have been, but it sort of fizzled after Joyce started dating Lonnie. She simply didn't have the time - she was trying to graduate, while working two jobs, and parenting her alcoholic father, and dating Lonnie. She enjoyed Hop's company, but their friendship began to fall on the back burner, just a little. Just enough for it to flicker out and die.

Hopper's goal had always been to get out of Hawkins. Joyce knew this - hell, most of their class knew this. He used to look on those little suburban girls and scorn, but not in a malicious way, Joyce thought. She thought he felt sorry for them - he had told her once that he thought it was sad they could see no deeper meaning, no bigger, overarching goal, that they had to stay in the same sleepy town, with the same sleepy people doing the same sleepy things their whole lives.

Joyce laughed at that, too. She was never a pretty little suburban debutante, doing exactly what people expected of her. Maybe she could have been, once, but her mom died too young, and though her dad was there at first - like any good father would have been, packing his ten-year-old lunch and brushing her hair even though little Joyce insisted he didn't have to, the alcoholism was patient, biding its time and slowly gripping him tighter until it stopped being a Budweiser after work with the boys on Fridays and started being Irish coffee on the mornings of Joyce's band recitals. There was no room for being Chrissy or Karen or someone like that - there was only room for pragmatism and self-preservation.

And then Lonnie came along and made everything better, for a while. He was gorgeous, and he liked her, and he held her when she used to cry (even though she would never tell anyone) in the middle of the night, he held her when she would wake up sobbing on his couch from dreams that were all too real.

And then, after much too much deliberation, they got married. And then there was Jonathan. And then there was Will. And there was a nice, little, unconventional family with a new mommy who would die for her two boys and there was a daddy - a daddy who loved to hold the babies in his arms and marvel because these children were his, actually his - but a daddy, who when the boys stopped being babies, and started being people, with personalities, and real thoughts and minds, lost a little nerve.

And then there was trouble. There was trouble because now there was four of them, and because there was four of them there was less time for just the two of them. Joyce tried to shrug it off - all couples have these kinds of issues, don't they? - but as time passed, it became harder and harder for Joyce to ignore the fact that their lives now were not like they had been when Jonathan was just a newborn.

Joyce was not a timid person - she wasn't the kind to roll over and take the shit life gave her. She stayed and made a stand, she gave life shit in return, but with Lonnie, it was different. This wasn't just about her, everything Joyce had been taught, or seen over the years conditioned her to think that children needed two parents. However she was to learn that this wasn't necessarily true - a single mom, minus a father who had grown bitter and abusive was infinitely better than the whole equation.

Joyce discovered this - and the workplace of the closest divorce attorneys - one day when she came home from work to find Lonnie playing with Jonathan. The kid was seven at this point, and developing that sense of self and personality that little children lacked, which bothered Lonnie. He didn't get the sons he wanted. He got sons, but not the baseball-toting, Golden Boy kind of sons. So when Jonathan quashed the idea to go to the park in favour of staying at home and looking at bugs and things in the backyard, for what was not the first time, Lonnie got angry. Really angry. Too angry - much too angry - for the situation. He screamed at Jonathan (who would later realise there was a more likely than not chance that alcohol had been consumed by his father on this occasion) and went so far as to strike him, once, before Joyce could intervene.

She came home in the middle of it all, two-year-old Will asleep in her arms, and the screaming match that ensued would be etched into her eldest son's memory forever. He would develop new perspectives on it, over time, but the memory of watching his mother drop Will into his arms, scream obscenities at her husband and proceed, with incredible mom-strength to literally push him out the door would remain the first place Jonathan's mind went to when someone mentioned his father for the longest of times.

And then it was just Joyce and her boys. For nearly a decade. It was the first time in Joyce's life, since the time her mom was alive, that something had been so ever-present in her life for long enough to become the new normal. She told herself Lonnie didn't count - she only lived with him for eight years, and he was never around anyway. But Joyce liked the new normal, she could adjust to it. She even liked it, for a minute there, which was something that hadn't happened in far too long.

Then, Hopper came back. This shouldn't have stirred Joyce as much as it did. She had heard bits and pieces from people over the years - apparently he had studied at the Police Academy in New York, and

he got married and started a family there. There was some deep, irrational part of Joyce that was jealous of the fact he had found success, and her life had progressed into a small pile of flaming garbage. But she didn't know why he was coming back, and that bothered her - if he had everything that the rumours had speculated, why was he coming back to Hawkins? It didn't make sense. Of course, there was a lot she was yet to find out, but that would make itself clear in the weeks to come. For that day, in 1977, she was content to reminisce about the boy she knew - the boy she might have loved, and all of the memories enveloped in his name.

Oddly, it was these memories Joyce dreamed about. Maybe it was because in her last moments of consciousness, she was thinking of him. Maybe it was because her brain was faintly processing his voice. Whatever the reason, her dreams were full of Hopper - little Jimmy Hopper, scuffing his shoes as he walked past her house on the way home from school. Teenage Hopper, cracking a beer and berating exams with Benny in his dad's garage. Hopper over the past few years - cynical, lazy and mildly alcoholic, to the point where it made Joyce's heart hurt, because goddammit, what happened to that ambitious little boy whose only dream was to make it out of this sleepy town.

But she mostly dreamt of Hopper over the past year - Hopper ducking in and out of her house like he belonged there, Hopper's laugh as Will told him something over dinner, Hopper's gaze on her when he thought she wasn't watching. Her dreams were full of him, for what Joyce would have wished she could say for the first time.

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Sometimes, she could hear him.

She could hear him whispering things to her, little confessions that her brain - which was most definitely not running on full power - didn't register. Things like "Please, Joyce, we need you here. I... I need you here."

It wasn't like Jonathan's voice, an inch from tears, begging her not to leave Will, or Will's unsteady voice reading the Lord of the Rings. Hop's voice was soft and filled with meaning, but it was as if he was keeping the rawness out of it, like he knew she could hear him. Her sons' voices were raw begs and pleas - Hop's was much more guarded, even when he probably didn't realise. Although, Joyce would have supposed, he had experience.

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In movies, you see the unconscious person come back to life almost delicately, eyelids fluttering open and voice small. It wasn't like that with Joyce. She came back with a violent cough that sent excruciating waves of pain all through her body.

"Mom!" Will's voice was the first thing her brain processed hearing as he bounded over to her, delight present in his voice. Joyce found herself trying to open her eyes - it took a few tries, but then she was blinking in the bright hospital light, watching the blurred form of her eldest son restrain Will from leaping on his mom.

(This was probably for the best. Joyce had a lot of broken bones.)

“Mom, we were so worried! You got hit by a car, we were really scared. I’m so glad you’re okay! I love you so much, Mom.” Will wrapped his arms around Joyce’s neck, and she smiled, raising her good arm to hug him back.

“I love you too, baby,” She rasped, though it sounded more like ‘I love you too, baby’.

“Hey, Mom,” Jonathan smiled, tears in his eyes. Jonathan was the crier of the family, though he would scarce admit it. “It’s nice to see you.”

“Jonathan,” Joyce reached her hand out for him, shaking a little, “I am so sorry.”

“What do you have to be sorry for?” He sat down on the edge of her bed and placed a hand on her arm.

Joyce’s doe eyes were wide. “Because I left you! I left you all alone in that house, against my better judgement, and something bad happened, again! This is all my fault!”

Jonathan tried to soothe her. “Mom, none of this is your fault! Your car got wrecked by a drunk idiot on Christmas Eve! Nothing - *nothing* - about this is your fault.”

Will shook his head in agreement. “Mom, we love you a lot. All three of us, and none of us blame you!”

Joyce hadn't realised Hopper was in the room until Will spoke. Three, he had said. Joyce's gaze swept the room - her vision still a little fuzzy - until she spotted him, stood back from the scene, observing with a small smile playing on his lips.

Joyce lay back in the bed, smiling at her boys. "I love you, too."

+ + +

"Hey," Hopper only approached Joyce when the boys had been ushered out of the room by the nurse, saying she still needed to rest. He stood by her bed awkwardly, as if, for the first time since he was a child, he didn't quite know what to do or say to her.

"Hop," she murmured, reaching out her good wrist and clasping his fingers in her hand. He smiled a serene smile - she didn't really associate the word 'serene' with Jim Hopper, but it was the only word to describe the peace in his eyes - like all the worry had left him, just for a moment.

"Joyce," he returned, his voice cracking a little bit. "You're okay. It's a damn miracle."

She gave a short laugh. "No, no, it's not," she murmured, watching as he wrapped his other hand - the one whose fingers she wasn't cracking - around her own. "There's a few reasons I might want to stay around."

“Really?” Hopper grinned. Joyce tightened her grip.

“Really.”

+ + +

When Jim Hopper realised he was in love with Joyce Byers, he thought it was too late.

The first time he had been sixteen and had developed a crush on this tiny, strong-willed, incredible girl with a temper of fire and a heart of gold, and he never did a thing about it until she was dating an asshole who only he seemed to think was an asshole - then it was too late for him to even think about telling her that he thought the world of her.

The second time he was forty-five, and holding her hand in a hospital bed in Indianapolis, Joyce giving that smile of smiles, the one he had seen directed at Will and Jonathan and once at an extremely delicious slice of chocolate raspberry slice, that one he had thought ‘If that’s ever directed at me, I’m not sure what I will do because Joyce Byers loves me’, but it was better than that, because *she loved him back*.

And for a shining moment, everything was beginning to look okay. Like maybe, after all this time, two failed marriages, three children and a mild supernatural apocalypse, everything might work out. For the first time in such a long time, there in that hospital room where a

man stood by a woman's bedside, holding her hand with everything he felt for her present in his eyes, there was hope.

Notes for the Chapter:

I FINALLY FUCKING FINISHED IT, ANYONE STILL READING!

i am so sorry this took so long, i am a hideous person, i know. blame the fact that school is a bitch and if i don't keep up i'll lose my scholarship AND the fact my broken foot healed and i have A TON of catchup. also i've been blatantly ignoring my commitments in favour of baking and rewatching television shows. sorry.

i do have some other fics in the works,so (shameless self-promotion ahead) if you're interested in that, follow me on tumblr. all my fic will be posted there (when i get around to it) and this story is all on @strangerthingsfics.

thanks so much again to everyone who commented and left kudos here and liked/commented/reblogged on tumblr. i know i am crap at responding to these things, but please know that each and every one literally makes my day! you guys are such treasures and i appreciate all of you a shit-ton.

lots of love xx